



News & Views

John
AHERN

State Representative • 6th District

2002 GOOD GOVERNMENT REPORT

Dear Friends,

I hope you all had a wonderful holiday season and will enjoy a more successful year! My thoughts and prayers of goodwill and peace go out to you, and to our nation as we rally together against challenges and enemies, both foreign and domestic.

For those of us in the Legislature, it promises to be a very interesting session in 2002. As you probably heard, the two special elections last November created a new Democrat majority in the House. Democrats control 50 seats and Republicans 48. Democrats also control the state Senate (by 1 seat) and the governor's mansion.

As you can imagine, with things being this close, it's almost as if we still had a tie. While committees now have just one chairman rather than two in the House, the close balance of power is still going to require a significant amount of bipartisanship if anything is to be accomplished. I'll talk more about all of this – and several of the major issues we face this year – later on in this brief report.

I am proud to represent the citizens and families of the 6th District. As always, please keep calling, writing and emailing me with your thoughts, advice and concerns. As your state representative, the more I hear from you, the more effective I can be in Olympia.

In your service,

John Ahern
Your State Representative

BUDGET WOES SPELL TROUBLE FOR STATE

The biggest challenge we face in the Legislature this year is fixing the state's budget. Last year, Democrats in the House and Senate forced through a 2-year budget that I voted against because (and time has proven me right) it irresponsibly spent more than we could afford on a state government bureaucracy that already needed downsizing.

I also warned that the budget would likely lead to some very large cuts in important services (such as health care and education), and might even lead to tax hikes on individuals, families and businesses.

Late last year, the state's economic forecasters gave us the news I had been dreading, that the budget written and passed last year was now \$1.2 billion in the red. With the state already in a recession before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, it seems unlikely now that our economy will rebound in time to save the state's budget.

GOVERNOR'S BUDGET IS WRONG PLAN FOR WASHINGTON

On December 18, the governor unveiled his plan to address the state's budget woes. Unfortunately, it protects state government at the expense of seniors, low-income families and those who most depend on critical services.

In typical fashion, the governor has designed a plan that brings relief to state government, not relief to our state's families. Government is supposed to work for the people, and not the other way around – but I guess the governor and I just don't see eye to eye on that point.

Locke's plan to make up the \$1.2 billion shortfall in the current budget cuts human services by \$235 million, including eliminating state assistance for disabled citizens. Fully \$35 million is also cut from nursing homes, as well as \$34 million in prescription drug assistance to low-income families and citizens on Medicaid.

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Instead of making cuts in state government, the governor has proposed cuts in services. Instead of eliminating the fat from our bloated bureaucracy, he's eliminated funding for programs that make a difference in people's lives. This budget plan does not change the way government does business one iota.

For example, there are more than 99,000 full-time state employees. This budget would only cut 440 positions from our huge bureaucracy. Originally, the governor had talked about 15 percent across-the-board cuts in all state agencies. What he's now proposing, however, doesn't cut government, just the services it provides.

Seniors and low-income families in Spokane are going to be hurt if the governor's budget fix gets signed into law this year. I know there is a better solution to our budget challenges and I'm optimistic that we'll be able to work together in a bipartisan fashion in the House and Senate to get the job done.

I'll certainly do my very best to work with the Democrats to find an acceptable, responsible solution to our state's budget woes. Our state can and must learn to operate with a smaller, smarter government that delivers better services at a lower cost to the families and job providers who pay the bills.

Please continue to call, write, and e-mail your concerns, comments, advice and questions. The more I hear from you, the better I can represent you in Olympia!

2001 IN REVIEW

While we certainly have our challenges this year, especially concerning the state's budget and transportation problems, we do have several successes from 2001 to build on.

First, I'm very proud the House and Senate passed my legislation to open a veterans' home in Spokane so that residents of Eastern Washington aren't limited to the two facilities in Orting and Retsil on the West side. Eastern Washington veterans deserve a facility to call their own, and I'm hopeful the new location at the former St. Luke's hospital in Spokane will make important services much more accessible to veterans on this side of the state.

Second, we managed – at least for now – to keep the state from opening halfway houses for the most dangerous of Washington's sexual predators in either Medical Lake or Airway Heights. There are other, more feasible, and safer locations for these dangerous offenders, and I'll continue working to keep them out of our Spokane neighborhoods.

And third, we made progress in the war against methamphetamine in 2001. Methamphetamine is the fastest growing drug problem in our state. Part of the reason is that the drug is cheap and easy to make. This year we passed a law making it illegal to sell or possess large quantities of the ingredients used to make meth. Unfortunately, a proposal to add meth production to the list of "Three Strikes" offenses was stopped by House Democrats, but I'll work with my Democrat and Republican friends again this year to see this legislation signed into law.